Naming the Native: Typification from Intertitle to Voice-over in *A Ramble Through Ceylon* (1912) and *Charming Ceylon* (1931)

P. D. P. N. Wijewardhane

University of Colombo, Sri lanka

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ABSTRACT

Early travelogues may have functioned not merely as records of colonised places, but as instruments for classifying the people represented. This article compares two travelogues of Ceylon made twenty years apart by commercial producers in two different film industries: *A Ramble Through Ceylon* (1912), a silent film bearing the trade mark of the French company Eclipse, and *Charming Ceylon* (1931), a sound short in James A. FitzPatrick's *Traveltalks* series. Using shot-by-shot multimodal transcription and van Leeuwen's categories for the representation of social actors, it traces how each film turns the people it shows into types. In 1912 the instrument of typification is the intertitle, a discontinuous written label that classifies a group before the image appears and then falls silent, so that the image can exceed it, most clearly when the women under the title "CINGHALESE NATIVES" look back at the camera. In 1931 the instrument is a narrator who speaks continuously over the image. Rather than merely replacing the label, the voice adds deixis, evaluation, ranking and statistics, pointing to a waiter's comb as the mark of his "station in life" while it calls a winnowing scene "primitive". The article suggests that the coming of sound may have intensified the typifying grammar of the travelogue rather than loosening it, Because the comparison rests on two films, the article treats the presence of the same grammar in a French and an American commercial production as an indication, to be tested on a larger corpus, that typification was a convention of the commercial travelogue and not only a product of colonial commission.

Keywords*:* travelogue; early nonfiction film; intertitle; voice-over; stereotype; Ceylon; multimodal analysis; social actor representation

1. INTRODUCTION

The surviving copy of *A Ramble Through Ceylon* (1912) opens with two cards. The first carries the trade mark of the French company Eclipse and the film's title; the second reads "CINGHALESE NATIVES". Then a group of women walks along a sandy road towards the camera, carrying large clay pots. Some wear the Kandyan sari, some a jacket and printed cloth, and several look straight into the lens. Twenty years later, in *Charming Ceylon* (1931), a man in a service uniform stands on the terrace of the Mount Lavinia Hotel, south of Colombo, with European guests behind him. A calm American voice informs the viewer that "our waiter on the terrace of the Mount Lavinia Hotel is a typical example of the original Singhalese", and that "his station in life is marked by the comb".

Both moments appear to perform the same operation: they take people who were filmed on a particular day, doing a particular thing, and present them as examples of a kind. This article is about that operation, which it calls typification, and about how it changed when the travelogue acquired a voice. Its question is simple: how did the instrument that names the people on screen, first the written intertitle and then the spoken commentary, shape what kind of people they could appear to be?

The question matters for two reasons. First, scholarship on early nonfiction and ethnographic cinema has shown in detail how the colonised were turned into spectacle (Griffiths, 2002; Rony, 1996), but it has given less attention to the verbal machinery of the travelogue, and to what happened to that machinery when sound arrived. The shift from intertitle to voice-over is usually treated as a gain in fluency. A close comparison

suggests that it was also a change in the grammar of classification. Second, the films of colonial Ceylon are usually discussed through one canonical work, Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon* (1934), a sponsored film of the British documentary movement. The two films studied here are of a different kind. Neither was, as far as the record shows, commissioned by a colonial body; both were commercial travel films made for general cinema audiences, one by a French company and one by an American series distributed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM). If they nonetheless share a typifying grammar, that grammar may belong to the genre and its market as much as to the colonial state. Two films cannot establish this, but they can show where a larger study should look.

The article makes three claims. First, the intertitle of 1912 may be understood to typify through classification: it names a group, a place or a practice in general terms, before the image, and then withdraws. Because it is discontinuous, it may leave the image room to exceed it. Second, the narrator of 1931 may typify more densely and in more ways. The voice classifies while the image is on screen, points to details within it, evaluates what it shows, ranks the people it names and supplies population statistics that no image could carry. Third, these changes appear to intensify typification rather than relax it: sound may have given the travelogue more ways to fix its subjects, not fewer. The argument is developed through a close comparative reading of the surviving copies, after an account of the scholarship on travelogues and types (section 2) and of the films, copies and method (section 3).

The article is part of a wider study of four films of colonial Ceylon (Wijewardhane, 2026). It deliberately leaves aside two questions treated elsewhere: the relation between labour and the soundtrack in *Song of Ceylon*, which a companion article examines (Wijewardhane & Laksiri, 2026), and the religious politics of representation in the period, which require separate treatment. Its concern is narrower and formal: the means by which a travel film tells its viewer what kind of person is on the screen.

2. TRAVELOGUES, TYPES AND THE NAMING OF IMAGES

The travelogue was among the most widely exhibited forms of early cinema (Martens, 2024, p. 25). Griffiths (2002) has shown how early films of distant peoples drew on the visual cultures of anthropology, the museum and the illustrated travel lecture, so that cinema inherited both their objects and their habits of display. Rony (1996) has traced how early ethnographic cinema turned colonised people into spectacle and coded them in evolutionary terms, as examples of earlier stages of humanity (Peterson, 1998). Grieveson and MacCabe (2011) have collected work showing how closely cinema and empire were bound, in production, distribution and address. In these accounts the person filmed rarely appears as an individual. They appear as an instance of a people, a race or a stage.

Research on early nonfiction film has since given the travelogue a history of its own. Peterson (2013) has shown that travelogues were a staple of the variety programmes of American cinemas between 1907 and 1915, offering instruction as entertainment, and that the imperial assumptions they carried were reshaped as well as expressed, so that the films could both confirm and unsettle their viewers' sense of their own place in the world. Altman (2006) has traced how the travel film moved from an illustration for a live lecture to an industrial product, Gunning (2006) has described its promise to bring the whole world within the viewer's reach, and Benelli (2006) has examined how Hollywood took up the attractions of the travelogue in the sound period. Studies of colonial cinema have meanwhile widened the field beyond official production. Shohat and Stam (1994) described an imperial imaginary that ran through popular cinema as well as propaganda, and Jaikumar (2006, 2019) has shown how British and Indian films of the late colonial period, and the filmed space of India itself, carried the politics and histories of empire. Visual anthropology offers a further point of comparison. MacDougall (1998) and Ruby (2000) have described the slow and contested effort of ethnographic film to treat the people filmed as subjects with perspectives of their own, an effort against which the commercial travelogue's habits of display stand out more clearly.

That habit has a longer history in colonial photography. Pinney (1997) has shown how photography in colonial India organised its subjects into types of caste and tribe, so that the photograph of one person stood for a category (Good & Lowe, 2020, p. 821; Scott, 2019). Mitchell (1989) has described a related arrangement of

the colonial world "as exhibition", in which the viewer is placed before a world already ordered into categories that the display then confirms (Ait Oukhzame & Stasiowski, 2021, p. 10). The travelogue inherited this arrangement, but it added time, movement and, later, sound. Its subjects walk, work and look back; the categories still have to be attached to them.

Two bodies of theory may help explain how such attachment works. The first concerns stereotypes. Hall (1997) describes stereotyping as a practice that reduces people to a few simple characteristics, represents those characteristics as fixed by nature, and so draws a boundary between the normal and the other (Rauhansalo, 2025, p. 11). Bhabha (1994) adds that the colonial stereotype is ambivalent: it presents its knowledge as already known and settled, yet it has to be repeated anxiously, as if it could never quite be proved (Bhabha, 1997). Fabian (1983) identified a temporal form of the same operation, the denial of coevalness, by which other people are placed in an earlier time than the observer (Kaczmar, 2021, p. 106). Words such as "primitive", "ancient" and "still survive" are its everyday vocabulary.

The second body of theory concerns how words fix images. Barthes (1977) described the caption's function as *anchorage*: an image can carry many meanings, and the text attached to it selects one and directs the reader towards it (Hauksson-Tresch, 2021, p. 135). In cinema the intertitle and the voice-over both anchor, but in different ways. The intertitle is a separate image in the chain of shots; it is read before or after the picture it names, not with it, and screenings of silent films were often accompanied by live music or a lecturer whose words do not survive (Kornhaber, 2020). Altman (2004) has shown that silent cinema was rarely silent and that its sound, from lecture and music to effects, varied from one venue to another, so that the written intertitle was only one of the words an audience might hear. The coming of recorded sound fixed the accompaniment to the print, so that the same words were heard wherever the film was shown (Crafton, 1997). The voice-over runs over the image itself. Nichols (2017) calls the documentary that relies on such a voice the *expository* mode: an authoritative commentator, usually unseen, addresses the viewer directly, and the images illustrate the argument (Skopeteas, 2020, p. 4). In an earlier essay Nichols (1983) argued that a documentary's voice is its whole perspective, carried by editing and composition as well as by commentary; this article attends to the narrower, literal voice of the commentator, while recognising that its authority depends on that wider organisation of the film, and on the claims to truth that the documentary tradition built around such commentary (Winston, 1995). Chion (1990/1994) has described the special authority of a voice that is heard without its source being seen, which seems to speak from outside the space it describes (Rose, 2020, p. 10).

What these accounts may lack is a fine-grained vocabulary for the different ways in which words can typify a person. Here van Leeuwen's (2008) categories for the representation of social actors are useful. Van Leeuwen distinguishes, among other choices, whether people are represented as specific individuals or *generically*, as classes; whether they are *nominated* (named) or not; whether they are *functionalised*, identified by what they do, or *classified*, identified by a category such as age, ethnicity or class; whether they are *physically identified* by features of the body; whether they are *aggregated*, represented as statistics; and whether they are *appraised*, evaluated as good or bad (van Leeuwen, 2008). These categories were designed for language, but they appear to apply readily to the language that names images, and they may allow a precise comparison between what an intertitle can do and what a voice can do.

3. FILMS, COPIES AND METHOD

The films. *A Ramble Through Ceylon* survives as a silent film whose title card carries the trade mark of Eclipse, a French production company of the period. The date of 1912 follows the archival record of the copy used in the wider study (Wijewardhane, 2026); one published account dates the film to 1910 and attributes it to Charles Urban (Boyle, 2010). Its camera operator, original length and first audiences are not recorded. *Charming Ceylon* is a short sound travelogue in the *Traveltalks* series made and narrated by James A. FitzPatrick and distributed by MGM. Accounts date it to 1930 or 1931; this article uses 1931, the date given on the archival copy consulted and by Boyle (2010). Its commentary is spoken in the first person plural ("our waiter", "our final view") by an American narrator.

Production and distribution contexts. The two films came from different branches of the commercial travel-

film trade. Eclipse was a French firm established by Charles Urban, the American-born producer whose British companies were known for travel, scientific and educational films and who advertised his business with the claim "We put the world before you" (McKernan, 2004, 2013). Films of this kind were sold to exhibitors as short items for mixed programmes, and they were often shown with live music or a lecture whose content does not survive (Altman, 2004, 2006; Peterson, 2013). The sources available to this study do not record under which name *A Ramble Through Ceylon* was distributed, or in which markets. *Charming Ceylon* belongs to a later and more industrial order. FitzPatrick's *Traveltalks* were launched in 1930 and made for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), whose short subjects department gave FitzPatrick wide latitude; FitzPatrick wrote and spoke the commentaries and came to be known as "The Voice of the Globe" (Arnold, 2016). The series began in the years in which American studios converted production and exhibition to recorded sound (Crafton, 1997), so that its commentary was fixed on the soundtrack and travelled with every print. This difference in industrial organisation matters to the argument: the intertitle of 1912 could be supplemented, contradicted or ignored by a live speaker, whereas the commentary of 1931 could not.

The two films therefore belong to two moments of the travelogue (silent and early sound) and to two commercial industries (French and American), and neither appears to have been made for a Ceylonese audience. This difference of origin may strengthen the argument. If the typifying grammar described below appears in both, this may suggest that it is not peculiar to one producer or one national cinema.

The copies. The copy of *A Ramble Through Ceylon* analysed is a digital transfer reported in the wider study as derived from a nitrate copy in the British Film Institute National Archive; it is in moderate condition, with scratches and flicker, and it may be only part of what audiences first saw. The copy of *Charming Ceylon* analysed is a digital copy, 7 minutes 43 seconds long, published online by a commercial footage archive under the title "Charming Ceylon 1931"; its burnt-in archive label and running timecode belong to the copy, not to the film. No running speed is recorded for either film, and neither copy can be assumed to match the film as first exhibited. All claims below are therefore claims about these copies.

Selection of sequences. The analysis began from complete transcriptions of both copies made for the wider study, which followed four steps: repeated viewing of each film in full; shot-by-shot transcription; coding of visual, auditory and linguistic modes; and the identification of recurring patterns across films (Wijewardhane, 2026). From these transcriptions, sequences were selected for this article by two criteria: people of Ceylon appear in the sequence, and the film names or describes them, in an intertitle or in the commentary, so that there is verbal text to analyse alongside the image. Sequences that show no people, such as landscapes and ruins, were therefore excluded. Two kinds of sequence were included although they do not meet both criteria: sequences in which visible people receive no verbal reference at all, because exclusion is itself one of van Leeuwen's (2008) categories (the elephant sequence of *Charming Ceylon*, in which the keepers go unmentioned, is the case in point); and the closing shot of *Charming Ceylon*, which completes the commentary. Units of *A Ramble Through Ceylon* whose principal subject is religious, the Buddhist monks and the "sacred" elephants, were set aside because they raise questions of religious representation that need separate treatment. This is a limitation, since those units may typify in ways not captured here. The sequences analysed are listed in Table 2.

Transcription. Each copy was viewed in full several times at normal speed and then stepped through shot by shot. For every shot the transcription sheet records the shot's order and approximate duration; framing and camera position; what is visible, including whether people look towards the camera; the written or spoken text; other sound; and an initial reading, kept in a separate column so that description and interpretation are not confused (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). Intertitles were transcribed as displayed, with the films' spellings and capitalisation. The commentary of *Charming Ceylon* was transcribed by ear and checked against repeated playback. *A Ramble Through Ceylon* was segmented by intertitle, since each card announces a new subject; the continuous commentary of *Charming Ceylon* was segmented where the subject of both commentary and image changes. Intertitles and commentary are quoted from the transcription, with the period spellings of the films ("Cinghalese", "Singhalese"); elsewhere the article uses "Sinhala" and "Sinhalese". Ellipses in quotations mark omitted words.

Applying the social actor categories. Every verbal reference to a person or group in the selected sequences was coded with the categories summarised in Table 1, a subset of van Leeuwen's (2008) system adapted to the words that accompany images. A reference could receive more than one code: the waiter in *Charming Ceylon*, for instance, is functionalised, classified and physically identified within two sentences. The analysis therefore attends not only to which codes occur but to the order in which they follow one another, and to whether the verbal text and the image refer to the same people.

Table 1

Analytical Categories and Their Application to the Verbal Text

Category	Question asked of the verbal text	Example from the films
Exclusion	Are visible people left without any verbal reference?	The elephant keepers in *Charming Ceylon*
Generic or specific reference	Is a class referred to, or a particular person?	"CINGHALESE NATIVES"; "our waiter"
Nomination	Is anyone named?	No one is named in either film
Functionalisation	Is a person identified by what they do?	"our waiter"
Classification	Is a person identified by a category such as ethnicity, age or class?	"CINGHALESE"; "natives"; "the original Singhalese"
Physical identification	Is a person identified by a feature of the body or dress?	"His station in life is marked by the comb"
Aggregation	Are people represented as a quantity?	"about two thirds of the native population"
Appraisement	Are people or their practices evaluated?	"primitive"; "mad frenzy"

Note. Adapted from van Leeuwen (2008). A reference may receive more than one code.

Interpreting visual evidence. Readings of the images draw on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) grammar of visual design: gaze (whether people look at the viewer, a *demand*, or are presented for inspection, an *offer*), social distance as indicated by shot size, camera angle and salience. Three rules governed interpretation. First, every reading is tied to a feature that can be seen in the copy, and the feature is described before it is interpreted. Second, where an image supports more than one reading, the alternatives are stated, as with the women's looks in section 4. Third, readings concern the positions that a film offers its viewer, not the intentions of its makers or the responses of its audiences, for which no evidence survives. Each reading was checked by returning to the transcription and the copy, and the transcription records, coding notes and analytical memos of the wider study form its audit trail (Wijewardhane, 2026).

Table 2

Units of Analysis in the Two Films

Film	Unit	Verbal text (as transcribed)	What is shown
A Ramble Through Ceylon (1912)	Title	"ECLIPSE: A RAMBLE THROUGH CEYLON"	Title card with trade mark
	1	"CINGHALESE NATIVES"	Women carrying clay pots approach the camera; several look directly into the lens
	2	"ON THE BANKS OF THE MAHAVELLI-	River; small figures washing or fishing

		GANGA"	
	3	"A TYPICAL SINGHALESE VILLAGE"	Villagers grouped before houses, facing the camera
	4	"ANCIENT CRAFTS STILL SURVIVE"	Potters and woodcarvers at work
	5	"PRIMITIVE FARMING METHODS"	Men ploughing with buffalo, framed at a distance
	6	"Missing Links"	Three children climbing a leaning coconut palm, in silhouette
Charming Ceylon (1931)	1	Commentary on Colombo	Elevated views of a street with mixed traffic
	2	Commentary on rice and road work	Men winnowing rice; men and women building a road
	3	Commentary on the "devil dancers"	Costumed dancers in full shot
	4	Commentary on elephants	Elephants hauling logs and bathing; keepers partly obscured
	5	Commentary on a hotel waiter	A waiter in medium close-up, guests behind
	6	Closing commentary	A palm-fringed coast without people

Note. The transcription of *A Ramble Through Ceylon* also includes units on ruins, elephants and Buddhist monks, which are not analysed here. Unit numbers refer to this table, not to the order of the complete film.

Limits. Neither film has surviving production records, so nothing below is a claim about intention. The people filmed may have had their own reasons for taking part, and the positions a film offers its viewers are not evidence of how real viewers responded. The article therefore writes about what the copies present, not what their makers meant or their audiences believed.

4. THE LABEL: TYPIFICATION BY INTERTITLE IN 1912

Classification before the image. The first intertitle of *A Ramble Through Ceylon* contains two words, and both classify. "CINGHALESE" assigns the people who follow to an ethnic category; "NATIVES" assigns them to a colonial one, the category of people who belong to a place as its inhabitants rather than its rulers or visitors. In van Leeuwen's (2008) terms the reference is generic and classifying: no one is named, no one is identified by what they do, and the group stands for a people. The order of reading matters. The viewer reads the category first, on a black card, and only then sees the women. The label therefore appears to function less as a caption for the image than as an instruction for viewing it. Before any face appears, the viewer knows what kind of faces they will be.

What the image shows is more specific than the label. The women are carrying water, a task that is part of a working day, not an attribute of a people. They are dressed differently from one another. They walk in a loose group several people deep, at a pace set by their loads. The intertitle appears to absorb all of this into its category: carrying water becomes something that "natives" do, and the particular walk becomes an example. This may be understood as functionalisation suppressed by classification. The women could have been named by their work; they are named by their kind.

The returned look. The label, however, does not control the whole of the image. Several of the women look

directly into the camera as they approach (Figure 1). In Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) grammar, a look at the viewer is a *demand*: it addresses the viewer and asks for some form of relation, whereas an image of people who do not look is an *offer*, presented for inspection (Liu et al., 2024, p. 4). The intertitle had prepared an offer, a specimen of a type. The women's looks turn part of the shot into a demand. Rony (1996) has described such moments in early ethnographic film, in which the people turned into spectacle can be seen seeing themselves being seen (Bright, 1998). The meaning of the looks cannot be established; curiosity, amusement, and impatience remain possible interpretations. Their formal effect, however, can be delineated. They appear to introduce into the image a relation that the label did not name and cannot reach, because the label has already left the screen.

Figure 1

Women Carrying Clay Pots Walk Towards the Camera After the Intertitle "CINGHALESE NATIVES" in A Ramble Through Ceylon *(1912)*



Note. Digital transfer of the copy used in the study.

This is the first structural feature of typification by intertitle. The written label is discontinuous: it anchors the image that follows, in Barthes' (1977) sense, but it is not present while the image runs. Whatever the image contains beyond the category, a look, a gesture, a difference of dress, remains on screen without commentary. The silent travelogue thus appears to typify strongly at the threshold of each unit and weakly within it. Live lecturers or musicians may have filled that gap at particular screenings (Kornhaber, 2020; Yeh, 2018), but nothing of what they said survives, and the film as a document leaves its images partly unanchored.

The typical and the temporal. Three further intertitles in the transcription extend typification in two directions. "A TYPICAL SINGHALESE VILLAGE" makes the logic of the type explicit. One village, filmed on one occasion, is offered as representative of all the villages of a people; the adjective "typical" announces that the image is a sample and that its value lies in what it shares with others, not in what distinguishes it. The villagers are grouped before their houses and face the camera, so that the composition, too, presents them as a set rather than as a household.

"ANCIENT CRAFTS STILL SURVIVE" and "PRIMITIVE FARMING METHODS" typify through time. The potters and woodcarvers are filmed at work, with their hands in focus; the ploughmen and their buffalo are framed at a distance, small against the field. Neither intertitle names the work by its purpose (making pots, preparing a field). Both name it by its age. "Ancient" and "still survive" place living craft in the past, as a

remnant that has outlasted its time; "primitive" places a method of cultivation at the beginning of a scale of development whose other end is occupied, implicitly, by the viewer. These appear to be instances of what Fabian (1983) called the denial of coevalness (see also Opratko, 2019). The people at work are contemporaries of the camera that films them, but the intertitles locate them in another time. In van Leeuwen's (2008) terms, they are also appraisals: "primitive" evaluates as well as describes.

"Missing Links". The most extreme intertitle in the transcription is attached to a short shot of three children climbing a coconut palm that leans steeply out over the shore (Figure 2). Filmed in silhouette against a pale sky, the children are spaced evenly along the trunk, bent forward on hands and feet. Without words the shot could be read as a display of skill and play; children climbing a palm is an ordinary sight on the island's coasts. The intertitle "Missing Links" selects another reading. In the popular evolutionary thought of the period, the "missing link" was a supposed intermediate form between apes and humans (Horrall, 2017). Attached to these children, the phrase appears to classify them not as members of a people but as specimens on an evolutionary ladder, below the human spectator. This is the evolutionary coding that Rony (1996) traces across early ethnographic cinema, compressed into two words.

Figure 2

Children Climbing a Leaning Coconut Palm in the "Missing Links" Sequence of A Ramble Through Ceylon *(1912)*



Note. Digital transfer of the copy used in the study.

The shot suggests how far the intertitle depends on the image's cooperation. The silhouette removes faces, expressions and clothing, the very details that, in the "CINGHALESE NATIVES" sequence, allowed the image to exceed its label. Here the image appears to offer little that could resist the words. Typification by intertitle is most complete where the image has already reduced its subjects to outlines.

The grammar of the label. Across the units transcribed, the intertitles of *A Ramble Through Ceylon* typify through a small set of resources: ethnic and colonial classification ("CINGHALESE NATIVES"), the explicit claim of representativeness ("A TYPICAL SINGHALESE VILLAGE"), temporal appraisal ("ANCIENT", "STILL SURVIVE", "PRIMITIVE") and, at the extreme, evolutionary classification ("Missing Links"). No person is named, and no one is identified by their work. The resources appear strong but intermittent. Each label governs the threshold of its unit and then withdraws, and within the unit the image is left to its own devices.

5. THE VOICE: TYPIFICATION BY NARRATOR IN 1931

Charming Ceylon has a soundtrack, but no one in it speaks except the narrator. Its commentary runs over almost every image, in a calm, explanatory and frequently amused tone. The six sequences transcribed appear to show five ways of typification by the voice that were unavailable to the intertitle.

Simultaneity: the label that does not leave. The first difference is that the commentary is present while the image runs. The opening sequence shows Colombo from a raised position: automobiles, motorcycles, rickshaws, bicycles, and bullock carts share a broad street. The narrator speaks over the whole shot: "At Colombo, the chief seaport … extremes in vehicular traffic … all hobnobbing with each other in perfect order." The image could support several readings, including one of uneven development under colonial rule. The voice appears to select one while the viewer is still looking, and its choice of verb, "hobnobbing", with its suggestion of friendly sociability, makes the mixture of modern and older vehicles a picturesque spectacle of variety. The raised camera adds the surveying position that Pratt (1992) described in imperial travel writing as the "monarch-of-all-I-survey" view. Unlike the intertitle, the voice does not leave the image to its own devices. There appears to be no unanchored interval in which a detail could escape.

Repetition and appraisal. The second sequence shows men winnowing rice with a large flat tray on cleared ground, then men and women building a road (Figure 3). The narrator introduces it as a "primitive scene, a group of natives separating chaff from rice", and continues: "primitive methods of labor are revealed in many ways … men and women working side by side." The word "primitive" occurs twice in one sequence. The repetition may be significant in Bhabha's (1994) sense: the stereotype presents itself as something everyone already knows, yet it is restated, as if the image alone could not be trusted to prove it (Bhabha, 1997). The image, however, does not appear to prove it. What the frame shows is a skilled and efficient technique that uses wind and a tray to separate grain from husk. The voice turns technique into a sign of backwardness and its practitioners into "natives", a classification that the intertitle of 1912 would have made once, on a separate card, and that the narrator makes twice, over the image itself.

Figure 3

Men Winnowing Rice in the Sequence Introduced as a "Primitive Scene" in Charming Ceylon *(1931)*



Note. The archive label and timecode belong to the copy.

The commentary is also explicitly evaluative in a way the 1912 intertitles rarely are. The "devil dancers of Kandy", filmed in full shot against an obscured background, are introduced with an account of a dance that "usually starts very slowly" and "works itself into a mad frenzy", and the narrator adds that the dancers

"thought they are driving away evil spirits". The phrase "mad frenzy" appraises the performance as irrational, and the belief is reported in passing, without explanation. Here the voice's tone, which an intertitle cannot have, contributes to the appraisal. The amused, unhurried delivery may place the narrator, and with him the viewer, outside and above the ritual.

Individuation displaced. The fourth sequence turns to elephants hauling logs and bathing. Here the commentary does something it does not do for any person in the film: it attributes character. The elephants have an "accurate sense of time", take "delight in a bath" and are "more appreciative of kindness". The animals are individuated and praised, while their keepers, partly obscured in the frame, receive no reference at all. In van Leeuwen's (2008) terms, the human actors are excluded from the commentary, and the qualities of punctuality, pleasure and gratitude that the film withholds from people are assigned to animals. The contrast appears to sharpen the grammar of the film. Where the voice speaks of people, it classifies and appraises; the only beings it treats as having dispositions of their own are not human.

Deixis and the body. The fifth sequence appears to be the film's most concentrated act of typification, and it depends on resources that only a voice can supply. A waiter in a service uniform is framed in medium close-up on the hotel terrace, with European guests out of focus behind him. The narrator says: "Our waiter on the terrace of the Mount Lavinia Hotel is a typical example of the original Singhalese. His station in life is marked by the comb."

Several operations are packed into these two sentences. The reference begins with functionalisation, "our waiter", identifying the man by his work, but the possessive "our" claims him at once for the narrator and the viewer, as part of the service the travel film and the hotel provide. The sentence then converts function into classification: the waiter is "a typical example of the original Singhalese". The adjective "typical", which in 1912 described a village, now describes an individual, and "original" adds a claim of authenticity and priority. The second sentence performs a physical identification. It directs the viewer's eyes to a particular object on the man's body and tells them what it means: a "station in life", a position in a social hierarchy. This is deixis, pointing, in real time. An intertitle could name a category before the shot; it could not direct attention to the comb at the moment the comb is visible, and it could not interpret the comb while the viewer is looking at it. Without the narration, the comb may mean little to an international audience. With it, the comb may become a sign of rank, and the man may become a specimen whose rank can be read from his head.

The scene also exposes the instability of the categories the voice imposes. The man is presented as the "original" Sinhalese at the very moment he stands inside a modern institution, a seaside hotel that served European travellers, wearing its uniform and serving its guests. Bhabha (1994) has described colonial mimicry as a resemblance that is "almost the same, but not quite" (p. 86) and that therefore unsettles the categories of colonial discourse (see also Wang, 2026). The waiter may be read as a figure of this kind. He is offered as the origin of a people because he stands in the most modern and colonial of spaces, and the narration's insistence on his typicality may be understood as an attempt to hold that contradiction still.

Aggregation. The same sequence adds a statistic: "the Singhalese make up about two thirds of the native population." The sentence is the voice's most abstract form of typification. Van Leeuwen (2008) calls the representation of people as quantities *aggregation* (see also Abdullah & Lulita, 2018); it treats a population as a mass to be measured. Placed immediately after the waiter, the statistic turns him into a sample of a quantity: one man stands for two thirds of an island. No image could carry this claim, and no intertitle in the 1912 film attempts anything like it. The voice appears to join the authority of the census to the authority of the camera.

Closure. The film ends on a slow shot of a palm-fringed coast without people, while the narrator says that "the foaming surf breaking upon the palm fringed shore of the Indian Ocean gives us our final view of charming Ceylon." The first-person plural returns ("gives us"), and the adjective of the title returns with it. The commentary that had classified, appraised, pointed and counted ends by naming the island's charm over an image in which no one appears. In compositional terms, the empty coast appears to function as the film's conclusion, offering a final account of what Ceylon is. The people the voice has named have been typified so completely that the island can finally be represented without them.

6. FROM LABEL TO VOICE: WHAT SOUND ADDED

Table 3 sets out the typifying resources of the two films in van Leeuwen's (2008) categories. The comparison suggests that the voice did not simply perform the intertitle's work more smoothly. It added resources and changed the relation between word and image.

Table 3

Resources of Typification in the Two Films

Resource	***A Ramble Through Ceylon* (1912), intertitle**	***Charming Ceylon* (1931), narrator**
Generic reference and classification	"CINGHALESE NATIVES"	"a group of natives"; "the original Singhalese"
Claim of representativeness	"A TYPICAL SINGHALESE VILLAGE" (a group)	"a typical example of the original Singhalese" (an individual)
Temporal appraisal	"ANCIENT CRAFTS STILL SURVIVE"; "PRIMITIVE FARMING METHODS"	"primitive scene"; "primitive methods of labor" (repeated)
Evaluative appraisal	Rare	"mad frenzy"; "in perfect order"
Functionalisation	Absent	"our waiter", immediately converted into classification
Physical identification	Absent	"His station in life is marked by the comb"
Aggregation	Absent	"about two thirds of the native population"
Nomination of individuals	None	None
Relation to the image	Precedes the image; thereafter absent	Overlaid on the image; continuous
Space left to the image	The returned look in unit 1 remains unaddressed	Minimal; details are pointed to and interpreted

Four changes appear to follow from the table.

From threshold to duration. The intertitle appears to govern the threshold of a unit; the voice appears to govern its duration. In 1912 the classification is made once, and the image then runs without words. In 1931 classification and image are simultaneous, so that no part of the image is left unanchored for long. The returned look of the women in 1912 has no counterpart in the transcribed sequences of 1931. This is not because no one in the later film looks at the camera, but because whatever the image shows is accompanied, at that moment, by a voice telling the viewer what it means. The interval of 1912 was rarely silent in the cinema itself (Altman, 2004), but whatever a lecturer said differed from one screening to the next, whereas the recorded commentary of 1931 was the same at every screening.

From category to rank. The intertitles classify groups. The voice classifies groups, but it also ranks individuals within them. "Typical", which in 1912 described a village, in 1931 describes a single man, and the comb places him within a hierarchy ("his station in life"). The colonial category of the "native" is refined into an ordered society whose positions the travelling viewer is taught to read from dress and objects. The type becomes more detailed, not less fixed.

From label to reading lesson. Physical identification is the clearest new resource. The intertitle could tell the viewer what they would see; the voice tells them where to look within what they see and how to interpret it.

The travelogue becomes a lesson in reading bodies. The pointing voice draws on the authority that Chion (1990/1994) describes in a voice heard from outside the image: it can survey the image and point within it without itself being exposed to view (Labarthe, 2019, p. 127).

From description to measurement. Aggregation joins the film to another order of colonial knowledge, the census, and adds a scale that images cannot show. The waiter is no longer only an example of a kind; he is a unit of a measured population.

These changes appear to support the argument that the coming of sound intensified the typifying grammar of the travelogue. The expository voice, which Nichols (2017) associates with authority and argument, gave the commercial travel film more ways to fix its subjects, and it closed the interval in which the silent image could show more than its label allowed. Something was lost as well as gained. The silent film's typification was crude and evolutionary at its extreme ("Missing Links"), and nothing in the transcribed commentary of 1931 matches it. But the crudeness of the intertitle coexisted with an image that could escape it, while the urbanity of the voice coexists with an image that is almost never left alone.

The comparison also bears, more tentatively, on where the grammar came from. Neither film is known to have been commissioned by a colonial authority. One was made by a French firm established by Charles Urban, and the other by an American series distributed by a Hollywood studio, for cinema audiences in Europe and North America. Yet both appear to typify in the same way, with the later film doing so more thoroughly. This is consistent with Peterson's (2013) finding that imperial assumptions ran through the ordinary commercial travelogues of American cinemas, and with Shohat and Stam's (1994) account of an imperial imaginary in popular film. Two films cannot show that the vocabulary of "natives", the "typical" and the "primitive" was a convention of the commercial travelogue across national industries; they show only that, in these two cases, it was not confined to official imperial film. Establishing the wider claim would require a larger corpus: other Eclipse and Urban travel films, other *Traveltalks* shorts, including those on places outside the British Empire, and sponsored films of the same period for comparison. Within these limits, the colonial order of knowledge described by Pinney (1997) and Mitchell (1989) appears to have reached cinema audiences through the ordinary entertainment of the travel short as well as through the films of empire.

7. CONCLUSION

This article has compared two travelogues of Ceylon to ask how the instrument that names the people on screen shapes what kind of people they can appear to be. In *A Ramble Through Ceylon* the instrument is the intertitle. It classifies before the image ("CINGHALESE NATIVES"), claims representativeness ("A TYPICAL SINGHALESE VILLAGE"), places living work in the past ("ANCIENT CRAFTS STILL SURVIVE", "PRIMITIVE FARMING METHODS") and, at its extreme, places children on an evolutionary scale ("Missing Links"). But it is discontinuous, and its images can exceed it, as the women who look back at the camera show. In *Charming Ceylon* the instrument is a narrator who speaks over the image. He repeats and evaluates ("primitive", "mad frenzy"), individuates animals while excluding their keepers, turns a waiter into "a typical example of the original Singhalese", reads his rank from his comb and converts him into a sample of a population statistic. The voice appears not to have softened the travelogue's typification; rather, it may have made it more continuous, more detailed, and harder to escape.

Three implications follow. For the history of nonfiction film, the comparison suggests that the transition from intertitle to commentary should be studied not only as a change in technology and fluency but as a change in the grammar by which films classify people. The expository voice appears to have brought into the travelogue resources of deixis, ranking and measurement that the intertitle lacked. For the study of colonial imagery, it suggests, as a hypothesis for a larger study, that the typifying vocabulary of the colonised may have been a commercial convention shared across national industries, not only a product of state commission. For method, it suggests that van Leeuwen's categories for social actors, designed for language, can be applied to the words that name images, and that they make precise comparisons possible between modes that are usually discussed only in general terms.

The study has limits. It rests on two films, which cannot represent the commercial travelogue as a whole, and the comparison cannot separate the effect of sound from the other differences between a French firm's film of 1912 and an American studio series of 1931, since both changed at once. It also rests on copies whose relation to the films as first exhibited is uncertain; the 1912 film may survive only in part, and the dates and attribution of both films vary between sources. The intertitles and commentary are quoted from a transcription of these copies, and screenings of the silent film may have included spoken commentary that does not survive and that could have typified as densely as the later narrator. Nothing here establishes what the makers intended or how audiences responded, and the people filmed may have had their own reasons for appearing as they did. Within these limits, the comparison suggests the same island named in two grammars and suggests that the arrival of the voice did not give the people on screen a voice of their own. It may have given the travelogue a better means of telling the viewer who they were.

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The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

Use of AI tools

The authors used Claude (Anthropic) to assist with checking source details and with drafting and editing the text, under the authors' direction. The analysis draws on the first author's doctoral transcription of the films. The authors take full responsibility for the analysis and the text.

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